Professional Communications and Writing Guide - SOE

Scholars' professional communications—their writings, their presentations, and their discussions with colleagues and other professionals—reflect the quality of their thought and the strength of their arguments. This *Professional Communications and Writing Guide* has been prepared to offer guidance and support to learners and faculty at Capella University who want to enhance the quality of their professional communications and, in particular, their writing.

The *Professional Communications and Writing Guide* primarily focuses on scholarly writing in the courses (course papers, unit postings, and critiques and responses to learner–colleagues). However, the advice, examples, and guidelines can be applied to all forms of scholarly writing, both in the graduate programs and later in professional life. The key objective of this guide is to articulate a common set of expectations for learners and faculty at Capella University.

The three sections of this guide follow the usual progression in professional writing in our courses.

- Section 1 – Course Posting Guidelines and Examples: offers tips and examples of substantive initial courseroom postings and of responses to learner–colleagues.
- Section 2 – Course Paper Template and Guidelines: provides information and advice about formatting, style, and content in a scholarly paper.
- Section 3 – Course Paper Sample: shows a sample paper, with many of the common issues and expectations highlighted.

We anticipate expanding the guide periodically to include sections on other kinds of professional communications, such as the preparation of formal or informal reports, scholarly and professional presentations (such as lectures), preparation of papers for publication, and discussions with colleagues.

The faculty of Capella University welcomes feedback and suggestions about this guide. Please direct them to Vern.Czelusniak@capella.edu or Stone.Shiflet@capella.edu.

Section 1 – Course Posting Guidelines and Examples

This section presents guidelines and advice for writing successful postings in the Capella University courseroom. This section is designed to articulate clear expectations for the quality of the postings made to answer the discussion questions and to respond to peers in the courseroom. The expectations outlined later in Section 3 should be applied to all forms of courseroom writing, including discussions and assignments. Obviously, e-mail communications are somewhat more private and can be more informal, but the basic standards of professional etiquette should always be followed. You should always try to be as professional as possible in all forms of communication within the courseroom.

This section has two main parts. Part 1 offers guidelines, advice, and an example for successful responses to the discussion questions. Part 1 is further divided into three steps and then followed by a reference list. After that, Part 2 discusses tips for successful responses to course peers. Part 2 also has six suggested examples of good (and not so good) replies to peers and a reference list.

Part 1: How to Answer Discussion Questions

Step 1: Understand what the question requires. Read the discussion questions carefully. Note that most discussion questions will have both a content issue and a level of critical analysis issue. Instructors will evaluate both issues: how well the response addresses the content issue(s) and its level of critical analysis.

Content issues require discussion of relevant research and theory—which are presented in required readings for the unit but can also be found in related research identified by the learner—that addresses the content of the question. Opinion (defined as assertions based on personal experience without research support) is not acceptable as the only basis for a response, but opinions may be stated as such. Appropriate and relevant research and theory must be cited in the explication of the content issue.

Analyze the question to ensure that you have identified all the required content issues. Many questions have more than one; answering only one, when there is more than one, weakens your answer. If the question requires more than one content issue, it is acceptable—indeed, it is a best practice—to separate the issues and treat them individually, using appropriate section headings.

Course discussion questions often (though not always) ask for more than one level of critical thinking. Typically, your discussion of the research and theory related to the content issue demonstrates your comprehension and understanding—the lowest level of critical thinking in Bloom's taxonomy (Bloom & Krathwohl, 1956). Many questions go on to require some *analysis* (Bloom's mid-level critical thinking). Sometimes, this mid-level analysis is followed by a request for a *synthesis,* an *evaluation,* or an *application* (Bloom's high-level critical thinking).

The key verbs, indicating the level of analysis, should be clear. For instance, *describe, summarize,* or *compare* and *contrast* are common words asking for low-level (comprehension and understanding) critical thinking. At the mid-level, words such as *analyze* or *develop* are common. At the highest level, you will find words such as *synthesize, integrate,* or *evaluate.*

When these specific words are not found, look for synonyms or instructions that *imply* the level of critical thinking. For example, if the question asks, “What are the three types of qualitative analysis that might be used to study students’ experiences of a new online educational program?” then this is low-level, asking for a description and summary of the theories and research involved in that content area. Note that an answer that merely named three types without any discussion would fail because it provides no evidence of comprehension and knowledge competence. If the question goes on to say, “design an online educational program based on students’ experiences using elements from all three types of approaches,” it is asking for *analysis* and *synthesis* (in order to combine elements [synthesis], one must first break down the three approaches into component parts [analysis]) and *application* (high-level), which entails using the synthesis to create a new use or application. Words such as *design*, *create*, and *use* indicate a request for application, a higher level of analysis.

Step 2: Turn your literature review into a draft answer. After you have completed your study of the literature related to the discussion question topic and are prepared to write your answer, create an outline. If you do not ordinarily write from an outline, it is highly recommended that you do develop the habit, because it will prove to be a very important skill in the capstone projects including comprehensive examinations or integrative projects.

There should be three main parts to your answer, which should always begin by repeating the question:

- An introduction, in which you **restate the question** to be answered and briefly **introduce your response**—one paragraph. State succinctly your core answer to the question, for example, by outlining the main points you will make.
- The body of the answer, in which you **discuss your response in detail**—two to five paragraphs. These paragraphs elaborate and provide details, evidence, and logical support for the points outlined in the first paragraph.
- A conclusion, which provides a conclusion or summary—one paragraph. This paragraph should summarize your answer and include recommendations for your own further study.

Paragraphs should always be developed according to the MEAL Plan. One of the sentences (usually the first) should state the main idea for the paragraph. The other sentences should support the main idea by adding details, subpoints, or evidence. Make sure that you develop your position on each main point with analysis, and then link or include a transition to the next paragraph.

All the paragraphs in the body develop and elaborate on the full answer stated succinctly in the introduction. Hint: If you list the topic sentences of the paragraphs, the list should provide a logically flowing outline of a complete answer to the question. Each of the supporting paragraphs in the body should flow in a logical fashion from the introduction of your position, to a discussion of your position, and finally to a logical conclusion.

Make sure to use the appropriate citations to the sources you reviewed. Scholarly writing requires that all positions be supported by citations to the literature. Best practice is to cite additional sources beyond course texts and required articles (although those are also acceptable).

Remember to post the full references in a reference list below the answer. You must use correct APA sixth edition format and style in your citations and references, and best practice is to use APA style for text as well. (Although we encourage it, you do not have to use APA for responding to other learners.)

Avoid the practice of composing long paragraphs in which you string together a number of ideas from a source and then cite that source after the final sentence. This gives the impression that all the sentences except the last are your ideas, which of course they are not. Instead, use the main idea from the author you are citing as your topic sentence (giving the citation up front), and then build on that idea by adding your own analysis or the related ideas of other authors on the same topic (also citing those sources). (See the Signal Phrases appendix.)

If you discover that your paragraphs look like a string of citation parentheses on the page (that is, each sentence is a citation from another author—or worse, from the same author), you are not doing enough of your own thinking in that paragraph. Go back and revise using the MEAL Plan. You should of course cite each author, but you should also provide your own analysis, synthesis, evaluation, or application of the main ideas. Faculty are not interested merely in what our learners have read of authors—we are interested in what elements of those authors' ideas our learners have understood and integrated, analyzed, synthesized, applied, evaluated, and put to creative uses. The surest way to demonstrate that you understand an author's work is to do high-level critical thinking about it.

Step 3: Review and revise. Before you post your discussion answer, read it carefully to make sure that your presentation is reader-friendly and clearly expresses your response. Also, use spell-check and edit your answer for typographical, spelling, punctuation, grammar, usage, and other editorial errors. These errors detract from the overall evaluation.

Most faculty members prefer that you write in the third person, although some prefer first person as long as the writing is scholarly and formal. Check with your course instructor to be sure you understand his or her preferences. You will be required to write in the third person for final papers, the integrative project (master's programs), the comprehensive examination, and the dissertation (doctoral programs). Course postings can be useful practice.

With practice, you will learn to express your positions comfortably in the third person. Adopt the scholarly habit of thinking of your own ideas and work as being someone else's. This will help you to write in the third person more easily, and it will also help you practice the intellectual skill of considering what challenges, disagreements, or alternative approaches someone might make to your work.

For example, the previous paragraph can be rewritten in the third person without changing the meaning: "Learners writing in the third person learn with practice to express their positions comfortably. Putting one's analysis in the third person fosters the scholarly habit of thinking of one's own work as being someone else's. This in turn promotes ease in third-person writing and strengthens one's ability to consider what challenges, disagreements, or alternative approaches a reader might make to one's work."

Now, we will move on to a discussion of a sample discussion posting, the answer to a unit discussion.

Sample Discussion Question

Use critical theory to explore how underlying cultural values, assumptions, and social relationships—especially power relationships—are reflected in the journal article you critiqued in Unit 3.

Sample Answer

[1]In Unit 3, the peer-reviewed article that was used for discussion was "Mentoring Circles in Higher Education," written by Darwin and Palmer (2009). In this article, it was mentioned that mentoring in higher education institutions has occurred informally or as a planned program where junior staff members are paired with experienced faculty members in a formal one-to-one program. The authors pointed out though that mentoring has many benefits and that many faculties miss out on the opportunity. Darwin and Palmer claim that although mentoring activity in alternative methods does exist, their study explored the perceived benefits of a group-mentoring model of academic staff. The authors indicated that mentoring circles are an alternative innovative group model of mentoring.

Critical theory is a theoretical perspective that power operates across and through all social relationships and organizations (Lynam, 2009). "The critical paradigm is to unmask and examine the assumptions that underpin social organizational process, institutional structures, and conceptual frameworks such as those guiding practice" (Lynam, 2009, p. 47). Using this theory, the cultural values, assumptions, and social relationships (especially power relationships) can be recognized and analyzed through critically reflecting on what the authors tried to get you to understand by inferring embedded messages in the text.

Cultural values, assumptions, and social relationships (especially power relationships) were reflected in the Darwin and Palmer (2009) article. The cultural values underlying the assumptions were that mentoring in higher education is sporadic and not really utilized the way it could be. Brookfield (1987) indicated that thinking analytically about the assumptions underlying our own actions and those of others is "organizationally and culturally beneficial as well as personally liberating" (p. 43). Our assumptions are acquired throughout our lifetime. Assumptions are self-evident rules about the reality that we seek to explain, make sense of, make judgments about, or act on. Mezirow (as cited in Darwin & Palmer, 2009) indicated that cultural assumptions are embedded in the dominant cultural values of society and transmitted to the social institutions.

[1] **This sample writing was reprinted with permission from Iris Cornell, a Capella learner.**

The noted cultural values and assumptions of Darwin and Palmer's (2009) article are that they made a blanket statement that the academic landscape is far different today than it was three decades ago. They infer that this decade of nursing educators do not have the self-confidence and are not as competent as the nurse educators of three decades ago to mentor other staff members. This assumption implies that nurse educators are limited in their ability to mentor. The cultural assumptions embedded within this article are vivid and easily identified. Brookfield (1987) contended that bringing these assumptions to the forefront helps us to really look at what is implied but not expressed.

Darwin and Palmer (2009) contended that various relationships with and between the staff members can be a positive and a collaborative working relationship that could promote access to a network of information, help to reduce feelings of isolation, and provide greater connectivity, increased confidence and commitment, career progressions, knowledge acquisitions, better understanding of the culture, and academic demystification. The assumptions here indicate that unless a mentoring relationship is established, social isolation is inevitable and extrication of a positive relationship with the organization is not possible. Cultural values and assumptions underlying this perspective fall under this power, and social relationships would not be possible unless one was involved with the collaborative and mentored partnerships with the institution and other staff members.

Another assumption examined in the Darwin and Palmer (2009) article is that the real issues are (a) that mentoring is not supported in higher academia, (b) that when given the chance to belong to mentoring circles, the faculty in the study felt that they did not need to spend as much time "mentoring" other faculty, and (c) that those that favored mentoring were those who were more comfortable working collaboratively. Brown and Keeley (2010) contended that when looking for the conclusions in an article, this is what the author wants you to accept. In the research article, Darwin and Palmer wanted you to understand that "mentoring circles worked for those who felt comfortable in a collaborative group environment and not for those who felt uncomfortable sharing information with colleagues who have different personalities, values and motives from themselves" (p. 133). The power-wielding struggle noted here is that if you are not competent to share in the group environment, then you do not fit in. This underlying stronghold suggests the powerful influences of the organization. If a program is not totally endorsed by the powers that be in the institution, staff is influenced to go along with the majority.

Brookfield (1987) indicated that linkages between the oppressive social structures and staff can be a risky and economically unfeasible situation—hence, critically questioning whether the success of mentoring circles depends on the approval of the cultural fabric's powerful administrators. Did the staff members who felt uncomfortable feel threatened by the fact that they would be viewed as incompetent if they did not like to participate? What are the social relationships of the groups? How do they relate to each other? Do they try to oppress new thoughtful and helpful ideas from others?

The critical theory perspectives noted in this article offer direction for understanding the ways individuals and groups respond or act in different organizational contexts (Lynam, 2009).

References [for the sample posting]

Brookfield, S. D. (1987). *Developing critical thinkers: Challenging adults to explore alternative ways of thinking and acting.* San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Browne, M. N., & Keeley, S. M. (2010). *Asking the right questions: A guide to critical thinking* (9th ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Darwin, A., & Palmer, E. (2009). Mentoring circles in higher education. *Higher Education Research & Development, 28,* 125–136.

Lynam, J. M. (2009). Reflecting on issues of enacting a critical pedagogy in nursing. *Journal of Transformative Education, 7,* 44–64.

Discussion of the sample response. Notice that the answer to the discussion question starts with a reminder of the article the learner critiqued in Unit 3. This provides a brief review of the important points from the article to be explored using critical theory. The following paragraph highlights critical theory perspectives as a restatement of the question itself. This allows the reader to grasp what is about to be presented as well as offering a baseline for evaluating the quality of the response. The opening paragraph of a courseroom discussion answer serves the same purpose as the introduction to a paper and outlines the main points to follow.

The answer proceeds to address the question items as outlined in the opening. Notice that each paragraph addresses a main point, supported by or stemming from (usually) a single source, which is always cited. The paragraphs continue to reflect a focused response to the identified assumptions discovered while reading the article in relation to critical theory analysis.

The learner provided her personal reflection in the fourth paragraph, when she included the perceived assumptions from the article as having a direct implication to her field of study. The author clearly stated this as her own thoughts, showing how she has reflected and integrated the studied material.

Finally, a conclusion summarizes the main points of the answer, provides additional questions, and offers suggestions for further inquiry for a greater awareness of the underlying attitudes that readers might undertake to deepen understanding of the issue. This is a well constructed response to the discussion question posed. However, there is room for improvement. For example, it is better practice to refrain from using quotes when writing scholarly discussion posts. The use of quotes provides information about what someone else thinks. It is more important to express your considered critical judgment and discuss what you have selected from the literature to support or challenge your ideas about the subject matter. How could the quotes used in the sample discussion post be paraphrased? Or, if you think the quotes were necessary to support the learner's response, reflect on your rationale? What other suggestions would you make to help improve the learner’s response?

Having briefly examined a substantive discussion posting, we turn our attention now to how to write substantive responses to the postings of learner–colleagues in the courseroom.

Part 2: Tips and Suggestions on How to Write Great Responses to Classmates’ Discussion Answers

Suggestion 1: Give plenty of support and add value. Discussions in the courseroom can become very powerful learning experiences. Telling your colleagues when they have written exceptionally clear, useful, or articulate postings is a wonderful way to enhance the sense of the learning community that we strive for at Capella. That said, required responses that only contain cheerleading comments with no other value added are not sufficient to meet the requirement of critiquing another learner’s post. Additional responses beyond the required critique of another learner’s post are always welcome and encouraged, and these certainly can be short supportive appraisals. However, if the required critique posting is only supportive and praising—the good element, it fails to give evidence that the posting was read—the downside.

Such responses are unsatisfactory as critiques. For example, submitting “Nice post, Sally. I really learned a lot from you! This will help me in understanding our course material” would be insufficient as a required critique post, although it would be a gracious gesture as an additional reply to your colleague. This does not mean that praise is not acceptable—indeed, praising your colleague’s work enhances the quality of your response.

Praise is important. Still, the principle to follow is that critiques ought to add value to your colleagues’ original posts. To add value to your response, you must go beyond praise and support. Tell Sally what in her post was helpful, how it enhanced your learning, what issues it clarified, and details on how it clarified the discussion question for you—this specificity gives greater value to your response.

For example, a valuable response might begin with something like this: “Nice post, Sally. I really learned a lot from you. Your explanation of critical theory and especially how it applies to teaching and learning was new to me, and very clear.” Then you can go on to deepen the discussion, which we will discuss in the next section.

Suggestion 2: Remember that this is a discussion on an assigned topic. Focus your response on the points made by the colleague to whom you are responding. In a face-to-face conversation, the respondent does not immediately change the subject to something he or she is more interested in, nor should that happen in courseroom replies. Instead, good communication skills suggest that the respondent could accurately play back what he or she had heard to be sure he or she understood and then could expand on those ideas, analyzing or commenting on them or raising a question that they brought to mind. Most importantly, the reply would stay on topic, and the topic is what the original post said about the discussion assignment, not a new idea.

Your response also should not jump immediately into your own take on the question, ignoring what your colleague said. Instead, give a sympathetic reading and summary of your colleague's post, to show that you have read and understand it, before you launch your own counterpoint or different interpretation.

The requirement to critique a colleague's answer fosters discussion of the *topic assigned for the discussion*. If the question asks for discussion of topics A, B, and C, keep your critique of or reply to your colleague focused on what your colleague wrote about topics A, B, or C. For example, in a course on research methods, a discussion question asks for an analysis of the sampling procedures used in a research article. When learners in that course make their critiques or responses to their colleagues, even when the original answer focuses properly on the sampling procedures, an occasional respondent will go off-topic to ask a question about, say, the article's conclusions. This is incorrect. Stick to the topic about which you were asked and about which your colleague wrote.

Your response should not stay with the original answer if the original answer does not address the discussion topic, however! In that case, a helpful critique might start with an appreciation of what the colleague did say, followed by a discussion of what the posting did not say, namely, the answer to the asked question. Here is where you can practice the art of providing difficult feedback in a graceful manner, something all professionals must master if they wish to prosper in their chosen fields.

To summarize, then, a substantive response to a discussion answer would first summarize briefly the main idea or ideas communicated in the original posting, to ensure that those points were grasped. Then, the respondent could add his or her thoughts, always sticking to the topic raised by the discussion question for that unit. Here is an example of a response to the previous sample discussion posting. Remember the discussion question: "Use critical theory to explore how underlying cultural values, assumptions, and social relationships—especially power relationships—are reflected in the journal article you critiqued in Unit 3." Here is the example of a substantive reply:

> Sally,
>
> I was interested in two of your points. You first noted assumptions found within Darwin and Palmer's article that suggested that mentoring in higher education is sporadic and different today in relation to how it was perceived and practiced years ago. Secondly, you specifically included nurse educators as a target in Darwin and Palmer's article, which also suggested that nurse educators lack the self-confidence and competency compared to those many years ago who were successful in mentoring roles. However, you go on to describe other suggestions from Brookfield and Mezirow that indicate attitudes and cultural assumptions as having a negative or positive influence on our perception of collaborative working relationships, confidence levels, social relationships, and, in turn, our self-perception related to our ability to connect.
>
> In my own experience within the workforce, I also see similar issues with nurses in relation to working relationships, feelings of isolation, job insecurities, and abuse of power in their jobs. The nursing profession has historically been female dominated and

infused with the perceived nurturing and caring image that personifies womanhood—the opposite of a rigorous, scientific, and aloof persona of a medical doctor, which historically (in this country) has been dominated by males. However, both professions have progressed, merged, and opened the opportunities for both genders. Still, for some people, medical doctors, and institutions, there is an underlying assumption that nursing is somehow less scientific or rigorous even though nurses are assuming more powerful roles in administration and are in a position of more control. These higher roles provide opportunities to support their nursing culture and help build the foundation of strength and unity as a team, working together. But does that happen? Could these underlying cultural perceptions somehow still penetrate societal perceptions of nurses and, in turn, influence the attitudes of nurses as a result of how they are viewed or treated?

I am curious as to why Darwin and Palmer suggested that nurses were more confident years ago as mentors in relation to today. Maybe those who have acquired more powerful positions in administration or academia are not as generous with their knowledge as mentors were years ago. From your perspective and the articles you studied, what do you see as the underlying difference in the academic landscape for nurse educators and mentors as compared to three decades ago?

Sincerely,

Joe

This example stays with and expands upon the main points of the original posting. The requirement for using citations and references is relaxed in the reply postings, and the language can be more informal, as befitting a real discussion. The key point is that the reply stays very close to the points of the original posting and to the substance of the assigned topic.

Note too that the last sentence invites further discussion. This is a key factor to the idea of discussion. The greatest learning occurs when people talk more deeply into a topic. This is the aspiration underlying the assignments in the discussion room.

Suggestion 3: When asking a question, give your own thoughts as background. Harry Stack Sullivan, an American pioneer psychiatrist who wanted to develop a method of dialogue with his clients, used to discourage his students from asking questions, by noting humorously that questions end with a hook (the question mark), and nobody likes getting hooked (L. Pilling, personal communication, 1973). This is why the so-called tennis-ball question is discouraged. Tennis-ball questions are brief hooks that give no information on which to base an answer and offer no personal investment by the questioner. Here is an example of the tennis-ball response: “Thank you for your post, Sally. Do you think that because most nurses are women, they lack the self-confidence to survive the demands of high-executive, administrative, or academic roles?”

What is Sally to make of such a question? The tennis-ball approach has two strikes against it. First, the respondent is not doing any work and gives no clues about what he or she is thinking. Although the question may be a good and honest one, there is no indication to Sally of what points in the original posting that it addresses, no context for how it flows from the original’s ideas, and no description of what the respondent is thinking. If this were a face-to-face conversation, such a tactic would leave Sally very uncomfortable.

And that is the second problem with the tennis-ball approach: Receiving a tennis-ball response can feel a bit intimidating or even hostile, and genuine dialogue rarely comes of it. That was Harry Sullivan's point: Safety for the one who is being questioned leads to genuine dialogue. The community of learning idea means we want to make our colleagues feel safe discussing things with us; this is a core value of professional communications.

Here is an example of a response that raises a new question without hooking Sally with the infamous tennis-ball question:

> Sally, I was interested in the second of your two main points, in which you talked about Darwin and Palmer's article suggesting that nurse educators lack the self-confidence and competency compared to those many years ago who were successful in mentoring roles. The idea that nurses may continue to "lack self-confidence and competency" tells me that there might be an underlying issue with nursing still being a female-dominated field. Very few seek higher education and advancement within their profession. Yet, the culture of nursing is vast and continues to have the ability to infiltrate business, higher adult education, law, administration, and entrepreneurial endeavors. I too wonder why the mentor role is not embraced by more nurses as educators for each other and as nurse educators in the specialization of education. As I reflected on that, I think it certainly could be true, and when I read Joe's response to you, I can clearly see that there is some validity to the argument you made.
>
> But I have another question that is related to your point. Might it be intimidating for some women to reenter the workforce after being home taking care of their husbands and children? Some husbands don't want their wife in a high-powered position. There might be some underlying cultural and societal influences related to a lack of self-confidence with this population of women. Perhaps there is solid research that explores and supports this position. However, the research you referred to seems to target nurses in particular as lacking self-confidence to reach higher positions. Maybe I am not understanding it correctly.
>
> What do you think about this issue? Does the research seem to focus on a woman's role as a nurse alone or are there other factors? I'm curious about your thoughts on the subject.
>
> Thanks, Sally, for an interesting discussion.
>
> -Naomi S.

In this example, the opening summary orients the conversation to the relevant points from the original, and Naomi's thinking and the anecdotal experience behind her question becomes quite clear in the second paragraph. The question that in the tennis-ball approach felt demanding, but now it makes sense and can be discussed in the context of research, theory, or experience.

Suggestion 4: Remember that "Participation in the Courseroom Discussion" is the standard. In the final analysis, the degree to which you interact with colleagues determines the true measure of participation, and the Capella model of learning at the graduate level is that participation is a key to learning. Obviously, someone who writes substantive messages to five other learners every unit is participating at a higher level than someone who posts a reply to only one colleague, assuming that both learners post substantive replies that make use of the suggestions above. Conversely, five cheerleading or tennis-ball replies are a lower level of quality participation than one substantive reply.

Nevertheless, meeting the basic Capella requirement (one post in reply to a colleague's original posting for each discussion question assigned in the Discussion area) or the requirement stated in the individual course is all that needs to be done; it meets the requirement for "satisfactory" (grade B) performance. However, every learner should consider the following: Increased substance and frequency will improve the learning experience. The gold standard for a graduate education is not what score you receive. It is the depth and meaningfulness of your learning and the critical analysis of that learning. You can evaluate these only in yourself, and only active engagement in scholarly conversation with your colleagues will help you achieve it.

Suggestion 5: Take good care of the mechanics. Finally, successful learners check their typing, style, and grammar before leaving the courseroom. Faculty members emphasize this element of scholarship earlier in our programs, as early as in the first foundation courses (FirstCourse), because there are too many learners arriving at capstone projects (integrative projects in the master's programs or the comprehensive examinations in the doctoral programs) without mastering basic grammar, usage, and mechanical skills. So now is the time to learn and master those skills, basic to the craft of the scholar-practitioner.

Remember: Capella offers two very powerful resources for you to use both in the courseroom and at colloquia, and they are the Writing Feedback Tool (in the Capella Writing Center on the learner iGuide) and the Writing Program faculty, who are at every residency. If you have any uncertainties about writing and usage, editorial mechanics, the sixth edition of the APA manual, formatting, plagiarism, or anything else about writing, the faculty wants to take this opportunity to strongly recommend that you ask the Writing Program mentors for help. Contact Stone.Shiflet@capella.edu directly.

Section 1 References

American Psychological Association. (2010). *Publication manual of the American Psychological Association* (6th ed.). Washington, DC: Author.

Bloom, B., & Krathwohl, D. (Eds.). (1956). *Taxonomy of educational objectives: The classification of educational goals* (Vol. 1). New York, NY: Longmans, Green.

Section 2 – Course Paper Template and Guidelines

This section provides a template for a standard course paper (end-of-term product). The sample paper, formatted in APA sixth edition style, is found in Section 3. Although the sample paper was written for the School of Education, its basic precepts are applicable across the entire university.

Section 2 also offers a set of guidelines for constructing and organizing an acceptable paper into major units (introduction, main points or body, and conclusions) and then organizing these units into sections and subsections.

Graduate school and professional writing requires high-level critical analysis along with lower-level understanding and comprehension of the ideas, research, and theories used. This section offers some suggestions for strengthening critical writing, including its organization. Other resources on critical thinking and analysis should be consulted to deepen one's understanding of these issues.

Finally, a set of references to format and style issues in the sixth edition of the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* are provided to address common errors. Learners should become familiar with chapters 2, 3, and 4. No single step will more immediately improve one's writing and scholarly presentation of ideas than becoming familiar with and correctly using these rules.

This section begins with a template of the title page.

Template: Title Page

Running head: [ALL UPPERCASE] 1

[The running head contains the keywords from the title. Starting on page 2, it is placed in the page header, which will repeat on each page.]

Title [in uppercase and lowercase letters; in the upper half of the page.]

First Name MI. Last Name

Capella University

Abstract

[in uppercase and lowercase letters; centered at the top of a new page]

The abstract must be double-spaced and in block format with no left indentation. The sixth edition of the APA manual stipulates that an abstract should be between 150 and 250 words (p. 27). The abstract is not an introduction to the subject. It is a summary of every main point in the paper. The reader should have the gist of the entire paper by reading the abstract. The writing should be clear and vigorous and free of extraneous words. The APA manual (pp. 25–27) provides specific guidelines for the abstract. The abstract should cover three points: (a) the topic of the paper—including the question to be answered, thesis to be argued, or problem to be solved (this should be stated not introduced); (b) the main points of the exposition—including research methods used to answer a research question, the main points of the argument, or the key theories or premises of the argument; and (c) the conclusions drawn and recommendations made stemming from the analysis in the middle section. Each segment should be approximately one to three sentences long, unless a complex element requires more description, and the tone should be formal and in the active voice and third person. If sources are used, citations must be included and counted as words.

Table of Contents

[in uppercase and lowercase letters; centered at the top of a new page]

Guidelines for Main Body of the Paper page #

The Introduction to the Paper page #

The Body of the Paper page #

Conclusion page #

References page #

Appendix page #

Guidelines for APA Formatting page #

Guidelines for the Table of Contents

The entire table of contents must be double-spaced. To create the table of contents you may use the Index and Tables tool (in the Insert menu). This feature requires that you use headings consistently throughout the paper, which is also important to do from a formatting perspective. If you need assistance with headings, see pages 62–63 of the APA sixth edition. You can format headings in MS Word to comply with APA style, using the Style tool in the Format menu. We recommend using two or three levels of headings.

Guidelines for the Main Body of the Paper

- Your paper (unless it is for a special purpose, like a comprehensive examination style paper, an annotated bibliography, or an interview report) must do **one, and only one**, of the following:
    - it should **answer** a clearly stated **question**;
    - it should **argue** or defend a clearly-stated **thesis** (position) or counter-thesis, demonstrating why a particular position (thesis) should or should not be accepted; or
    - it should **pose** a problem and offer a **solution** to it.
- Clear organization is very important. Your topic should be focused and specific, and each of the main points that develop your argument or support it (that is, answer the question or argue the position you are taking) should have its own section. To clearly mark the organization, use **Level 1 headings** for the main sections of your text (see APA, 6th ed., pp. 62–63). Do not be afraid to use Level 2 and Level 3 headings for important subordinate points or subsections within a main section. Most course papers will not need more than three heading levels.
- The body of your paper must have the sections listed below, described in the pages that follow:
    - an introduction that follows the title of the paper;
    - discussion of the main points, each having its own Level 1 heading (you also can use Level 2 headings for subordinate points);
    - a conclusion, which starts with a Level 1 heading; and
    - a reference list.
- If you use **tables or figures**, follow APA sixth edition rules to format them (pp. 125–167). Place each table or figure inside your text as close to your mentioning it as possible.
- Rarely will a course paper need an **appendix** to present material that would distract the reader if included in the main body of the paper. See pages 38–40 of the sixth edition of the APA manual for guidance.
- Although **grammar, usage, and mechanics** (“G/U/M”) are a local concern, they are still very important. All grammar, usage, spelling, and punctuation should conform to good English composition as codified by the sixth edition of the APA manual. Elaine Hacker’s books and handbooks are also a handy and very helpful baseline for good grammar. Follow APA guidelines when you are uncertain of formatting, style, grammar, or usage.

[Note: Although these guidelines are single-spaced, your entire paper must be double-spaced.]

The Introduction to the Paper

[Use title of the paper in uppercase and lowercase letters and centered at the top of a new page.]

1. The introduction to the paper, which should not have “Introduction” as a heading, follows immediately below the title of the paper, which is typed in uppercase and lowercase letters and centered. (There is no heading labeled “Introduction” since it is assumed all papers begin with an introduction; see APA, 6th ed., p. 27.)

2. In a course paper, the introduction section should state the **question** to be answered, the **thesis** to be argued, or the **problem** to be solved. If the paper is a special purpose paper (e.g., an annotated bibliography or an interview report), the introduction should make the paper’s purpose clear and identify the types of issues that will be addressed.

3. The introduction should provide a **brief background of the main issues** involved in the question, thesis, or problem. It should not provide a lengthy theoretical overview of the entire field of study. For example, if the question you are writing about is whether *X* is an effective method of pedagogy for *Y* classrooms, it is not necessary to go into detail about the history of pedagogy or the origins of classrooms in the United States. Nor is it necessary to discuss in great detail the origin and development of the *X* pedagogical theory (or its relationship with any other form of pedagogy). An acceptable background passage would include a brief description of the problems that make the new pedagogy necessary, sufficient information for the reader to understand what *X* pedagogy consists of and what the problems of *Y* classroom applications look like, and a brief outline of why *X* might be useful in addressing the problems of *Y*. These points, while limited in scope, should be supported with citations to the relevant literature. In the introduction, these citations should be given succinctly; they will be more fully elaborated and critically evaluated in the main body of the paper (see below).

4. Next, the introduction should also state the **main points** that will be developed in the paper to answer the question, argue the thesis, or solve the problem. The logic of the argument should be apparent to the reader. In the case of a special paper (such as a report of an interview), the main themes that will be addressed should be stated. This requirement makes **outlining** your paper an important step, because creating an outline will assist you in ensuring that your paper indeed has main points and that those main points indeed are lined up logically. Make sure that the brief statement of the main points of your argument (in the introduction) follows the order in which the points are handled in the body of the paper.

5. The introduction should also briefly state the **conclusions** that the paper will reach, without going into detail about them. In the case of a special paper, there should be a clear statement of what you took away from the experience of preparing the paper.

6. Many writers write the introduction after the main body of the paper is finished.

7. Your theme in the introduction is “Tell them what you will tell them.”

The Body of the Paper

[Level 1 heading; use words appropriate to your topic]

Organization of the Body of the Paper

[This is a Level 2 heading; use words appropriate to your topic.]

- The organization of the main body of the paper should follow the points stated in the introduction. The key is that the main points line up logically to support the objective of the paper. Again, an outline will prove helpful. In the case of special papers, the actual assignment may predetermine the outline.
- Keep your focus: Stick to the main points stated in the introduction. **Answer** the question, **argue** the thesis, or **solve** the problem. Do not introduce unrelated or tangential ideas in the main body of the paper. (See the next point.)
- Follow exactly the logic and outline you wrote in the introduction, if you wrote that first. If you will write your introduction last, Capella faculty highly recommend that you have and stick to an outline. If in working on the main body, you come across new information that changes your argument, be sure to revise the introduction to include the new points.

Literature Review Section

[This is also a Level 2 heading; use words appropriate to your topic.]

- In the main body, you will be describing, evaluating, and drawing conclusions from the literature that you reviewed for this paper and may have mentioned briefly in the introduction. You should present the literature review as follows:
- Describe the particulars of the studies (population, approach, methods, and findings) or the main points of the theories (key concepts and variables). Remember that your readers did not read the study, so they need to know what the study actually did and what it was designed to do.
- Evaluate the strength of the research you reviewed. (For example, a study that has a sample of five people is weak when it comes to generalization to an entire population. Its findings should be considered with caution, and you should state that in your analysis.) Other factors to evaluate include the correctness of the methods related to the research question, the appropriateness of the instruments, and the logic of the interpretation of the conclusions.
- Discuss the articles’ conclusions in terms of how they support or challenge your own position, which is the focus of the paper.

Evaluation of the Literature

[This is also a Level 2 heading; use words appropriate to your topic.]

- **Critical thinking** is crucial in the main body of the paper. Do not just report studies; **evaluate** them (see the preceding point). Do not merely analyze or compare-and-contrast; these steps are important, but you do them when you report on the studies. Try to synthesize or integrate studies (bring disparate studies together to focus on the same issue) and always evaluate them. Are the studies you are presenting well designed and logically interpreted? Do they support your point? If they challenge your point, can you show why they fail to do so successfully?

- Critical thinking also requires that you give those who see things differently their due. Search for alternative hypotheses, opposing views, and differing explanations. Report these too, and analyze and evaluate their strengths. If the opposing views are stronger and more robust, be humble enough to adopt them or acknowledge them. If you do not adopt them in the end, explain why not.

Alternative Explanations and Approaches

[This is also a Level 2 heading; use words appropriate to your topic.]

- When you have adopted a position (based on your literature review and evaluation), mention alternative explanations, even if the original author(s) failed to do so. This shows high-level critical and creative thinking about the research you are relying on and about your own work.

- After you finish the main body of the paper, write a brief summary of your main points and a transitional sentence or paragraph looking ahead to the Conclusion section.

- Your theme in the main body of the paper is “Tell them what you have to tell them.”

Conclusion

[Level 1 heading]

- In the conclusion section, you should once again summarize the main points. Your summary need not be more than one or two sentences, since you already provided one in the ending of the main body (see above). Most important: be sure to answer the question you raised for the paper in a very clear statement. For example, if your paper raised the question "What approaches to change management are most effective when midsize manufacturing companies are faced with requirements to downsize?" you should answer it clearly. Do not leave it to your readers to draw their own conclusions. Readers may disagree with your conclusions, but they should know what they are and how you came to them. Showing them the how is the job of the main body of the paper. Your theme in the conclusion is "Tell them what you told them."

- What do your conclusions mean? Offer your interpretation of the meaning of your conclusions about the thesis, your answer to the question, or your solution to the problem.

- Include a subsection evaluating the strengths and weaknesses (limitations) of your paper. Could it be organized in a better way? Might you have explored different literatures if you had had more time? If you had this paper to do over again, how would you improve it? In a term paper, this discussion need not be extensive, but give evidence that you have considered it. Critiquing your own work is excellent practice for your comprehensive exams, dissertation, or integrative project.

- What questions has this paper raised for you that go beyond its topic? Include a subsection about recommendations for future study that proposes questions that you think should be investigated further, related problems remaining to be solved, or elements of the thesis that were not argued fully. Again, this need not be extensive, but practice it in every paper you write.

- Finally, take your final position. Is there anything you want to say about the issues you have discussed in this paper? At the graduate level, it is appropriate to take a position, to state your own opinion based on the research you have done. Do it here. It is also acceptable to describe any takeaway messages you got from doing the project.

- Be sure to use third-person writing throughout the entire paper. Some authors try to make their writing more formal by using the word *we*, but this is inappropriate and misleading. Was there more than one person writing the paper and doing the literature review and evaluation? If there is only one name on the title page, there should not be *we* writing the paper!

References

[in uppercase and lowercase letters; centered at the top of a new page]

American Psychological Association. (2010). *Publication manual of the American Psychological Association* (6th ed.). Washington, DC: Author.

The reference list must comply with Chapter 7 of APA sixth edition. Perfection is the standard. Here are some common reference list errors (per Capella University faculty experience):

- Incorrect capitalization of or failure to italicize titles of books and journals. Capitalize only the first word of book titles (and the first word after a colon), but capitalize all main words of a journal title.
- Incorrect capitalization of journal article titles. Capitalize only the first word (and the first word after a colon).
- Incorrect citation of Web-retrieved articles.
- Incorrect italicization of book and journal titles. Italicize book titles and titles of journals. Edition numbers (in parentheses), chapter titles, and article titles are not italicized.
- Incorrect use of ampersand (&) versus *and* when referencing multiple authors of a particular work. In reference lists, use ampersand before the last author listed.
- Incorrect use of commas and periods in citations and reference lists. (For in-text citations, a common error includes placing periods before rather than after the author-year citation in a sentence.)
- Too frequent use of secondary or tertiary sources (such as textbooks, summary articles, and reviews) rather than primary sources (original research or theory). Use primary sources at least 75 percent of the time.
- Unnecessary inclusion of the issue number after the volume number in a reference to a periodical. Include the issue number only if the pages are numbered in each issue starting at 1.
- Inclusion of in-text citations not referenced in the reference list.
- Inclusion of references that are not cited in the text.

Appendix

[in uppercase and lowercase letters; centered at the top of a new page]

Note: In a course term paper, an appendix is unlikely to be necessary. Use an appendix only if the paper refers to some document, instrument, data set, or other material that the reader should be able to see but that would distract if included in the main text.

APA Format and Style Issues

The pages cited below from the sixth edition of the APA manual do not represent every APA requirement. They are areas that represent errors commonly made in papers, as reported by faculty instructors across Capella.

- *Title page* (p. 229).
- *Abstract* (pp. 25–27)
- *Table of contents*—not usually required but may be at the instructor's preference. If using one, go to the Insert menu (MS Word) and use the Index and Tables tool or the Table of Contents tool. The inclusion of two heading levels is recommended.
- *Formatting and order of pages* (pp. 228–230).
- *Sample papers* (pp. 41–59). A sample paper is also included in this writing guide in Section 3, and your paper should look very similar to it. You may not utilize everything illustrated, but if you do, use the sample as a guide.
- *Headings*—appropriate use is very important (pp. 62–63).
- *Series*—knowledge of all types is very important (pp. 63–65).
- *Spelling* (p. 96).
- *Text citations*—brief notes that identify sources used in the text (pp. 169–192).
- *References* (pp. 193–224).
- *Quotations* (pp. 170–174).
- *Tables and figures*—if you use them (pp. 125–167).
- *Appendices*—if you use them (pp. 38–40).

IMPLICATIONS FOR EDUCATIONAL PLANNING page#

Section 3 – Course Paper Sample

The sample paper was written for the School of Education; however, its basic precepts are applicable across the entire university.[2] To maintain consistency, instructors should require strict APA formatting; however, you should always ask instructors their preferences on the first day of class. Unless otherwise indicated, this paper adheres to the sixth edition of the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association*. (See the sample papers in the APA manual on pages 41–59.)

Running head: IMPLICATIONS FOR EDUCATIONAL PLANNING [3] 1

Policy Paper: Implications for Educational Planning[4]

Name of Learner

Capella University

[2] General guidelines include setting uniform 1-inch margins at the top, bottom, left, and right of each page and using a uniform typeface—preferably Times New Roman—and font size (usually 12-point) throughout the paper.

[3] The running head should contain the keywords from the title and be repeated on each page (APA, 6th ed., p. 229). Place the page number after the running head in the manuscript header (see APA, p. 230).

[4] Begin the title 3 inches from the top of the paper.

Abstract[5]

[6]The purpose of this paper is to analyze a policy in special education that is in need of clarification or restructuring. Based upon a compliance monitoring session conducted by Montana's Office of Public Instruction, the Elkhat School District was found to be out of compliance in the area of justifying a child's need for special education services by effectively completing the implications for educational planning section of the Evaluation Report. Based upon this recommendation to achieve compliance, a plan has been constructed to address this issue.[7]

---

[5] **Learner Review (LR): Does the abstract adequately summarize the key points addressed in the paper?**

[6] **The abstract should be left aligned, with no indentation. It should not exceed 250 words (APA, 6th ed., pp. 27).**

[7] **LR: Keywords are missing. Identify a few keywords that could be used in this paper.**

Table of Contents[8]

Title Page	Page number
Abstract	Page number
Table of Contents	Page number
Introduction	Page number
Policy	Page number
Rationale for Policy[9]	Page number
Literature Review	Page number
Fiscal Impact[10]	Page number
Conclusion	Page number
References	Page number

---

[8] **The APA manual does not mention a table of contents, but if it is an instructor's preference, please consider this example as a model. If including a table of contents, go to the Insert menu (in Microsoft Word) and select the Index and Tables tool or the Table of Contents tool.**

[9] **Indent the Level 2 headings in the table of contents.**

[10] **LR: This table of contents is missing major section headings, including Training Stakeholders and Plan, that are part of the body of the paper.**

Policy Paper: Implications for Educational Planning[11]

Elkhat Public Schools was recently monitored by the state of Montana's special education division. The monitoring process took place in April of 2008. [12]During this process a team of staff members from the Office of Public Instruction spent one day scrutinizing twenty preselected special education student records using a document called the guided record review.

The guided record review is used by the Office of Public Instruction (OPI) to "ensure that all children with disabilities receive a free appropriate public education (FAPE)…[by reviewing] individual student records to verify that the district's child find procedures, evaluations and reevaluation processes, and the Individualized Education Programs (IEP) procedures meet Montana's standards" (Montana Special Education, 2007, p. 4).[13] The state is required by the federal government to maintain scrutiny of special education records kept by districts on a regular five- year cycle. School districts are rated on all aspects of the special education paperwork maintained in the files. From this review of the records, the Office of Public Instruction found two areas that were not in compliance:

[11] Do not use "Introduction" or "Background" as a heading. Instead, type the paper's title with title-case capitalization. The introductory section follows the paper's title and should present the problem that the paper presents.

[12] Use two spaces after punctuation at the end of a sentence (APA, 6th ed., p. 88). LR: Are there spacing inconsistencies within this paper?

[13] No more than 10% of a paper should be direct quotations. Page numbers are required for all quotations. If a material has no pagination, cite the paragraph number or section heading. (See APA, 6th ed., pp. 170–172).

1) Annual IEP dates were not always met within one year and reasons for this lapse were not clearly recorded in the IEP.
2) The implications for educational planning justifying a student's need for special education were not clearly stated in the Evaluation Report.[14]

For purposes of this paper, the second compliance issue was selected, due to the fact that all staff members working with the student are responsible for clearly defining a child's need for special education along with an explanation of how the child responded to a variety of interventions prior to a referral for special education services.

Policy Proposal[15]

The policy in need of clarification is in the area of 10.16.3221 Comprehensive Evaluation Process and Reevaluations (See Appendix A).[16] Within this policy, there is a straightforward statement that the "evaluation report shall include statements of implications for educational planning in terms understandable to all team members" (Evaluation Guide, 2008, p. 22). The Elkhat Public Schools #4 board policy states that Libby will follow the requirements set forth by the state of Montana (see Appendix B). These directions are not clear for team members and results in confusion.

The issue in the policy is in the terminology: implications for educational planning, does not fully explain what the author of the assessment is supposed to write. The policy needs

---

[14] **LR: Is the format of this list in compliance with the sixth edition of the APA manual?**

[15] **This is a Level 1 heading. Typically, two or three levels of headings are adequate for a course paper. LR: Are the headings correctly formatted throughout this paper?**

[16] **Appendices A, B, and C are missing from the paper.**

clarification in order to achieve full participation by all parties involved in the evaluation of the child. A proposal of new language for the policy would read:

> The evaluation report shall include statements written in terms understandable to all team members explaining how the student's response to interventions affects the child's educational performance and the need for special education and related service or other non special education support services.[17]

This clarification is critical to achieving full staff support when completing reports. All students have strengths that do not always hinder their ability to receive a Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE). As the team determines eligibility for special education, having information on how a student responds to a variety of intervention strategies will assist in developing an effective program in the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE).

Rationale

During the guided record review, the reviewers noted that there were students qualified for special education disabilities with little evidence of a student's need for these services (See Appendix C). Upon a department review of the records, the resulting discovery was that the general education staff conducting many of the observations and classroom-based assessments did not indicate the implications for education planning for these students. Therefore, the evaluation report did not completely address the child's need for special education services.[18]

---

[17] **LR: Is the format of this quotation in compliance with the sixth edition of the APA manual?**

[18] **LR: How can this single line of a paragraph be corrected?**

[19]The goal "of the comprehensive evaluation is to answer the question of why the student is struggling in an academic area" (Mather & Kaufman, 2006, p. 749). Thus, when a general education teacher does not explicitly state how this child's deficits are impacting their ability to achieve an appropriate education in conjunction with why the instruction is not effectively meeting this child's needs, the evaluation team does not have all the information needed to make an informed and more importantly, unbiased decision.

A second factor affecting a child's need for special education is often based upon the teacher's perceptions of the child and that teacher's belief in their own ability to instruct the child. When a teacher perceives they are not able to meet the needs of a child, they will often refer the student for special education testing. Egyed and Short (2006) indicate that despite the [special education referrals] importance, the decision to refer a child for special education services often is subjective, and may rely on teachers' level of tolerance for disruptive behaviors" (p. 462).[20] Research has shown that when a teacher refers a child to special education testing, the overwhelming result is in the child's placement in special education (Algozzine, Christenson, & Ysseldyke, 1981).

[21]Abidin and Robinson (2002) reviewed research on referral-to-placement and discovered that special education placement decisions were often the result of the teachers' opinions of the student rather than the assessment data. This leads back to the implications for education planning statement: a teacher needs to clearly explain what is effective and what has not been

---

[19] **LR: How could the quotations used on this page be cited or paraphrased differently?**

[20] **Make sure quotations have a beginning and an end. LR: Where does the quotation begin in this paragraph?**

[21] **LR: Check the use of resources, citations, and grammar on this page for proper APA sixth edition format.**

successful for this student. Without this information, the team is unable to make an unbiased decision regarding qualifying a child for special education services.

Legal Justification

During the evaluation process, a child must demonstrate that they have a disability, but that they must also have a need for special education services (Evaluation guide, 2008). While this seems simple enough, this process can be extremely subjective. Fortunately, there are guidelines set forth by both No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Turnbull (2005) outlines several provisions in the law for determining whether a child qualifies for special education. The first disqualifier is a student's lack of appropriate instruction. Children should not be considered disabled if they have not had access to quality curriculum and instruction. The second disqualifier discussed is that the child must demonstrate a lack of response to scientific, researched-based interventions, and that this data must be included in the evaluation procedures.

IDEA legal requirements in Sections 614 (a)-(c) refer to the nondiscriminatory evaluation principle as part of the safeguards for insuring an unbiased evaluation. Evaluators must provide a complete assessment of the child, including data collected from classroom performances and district/state assessments. "The requirement that the evaluation now must attend to the student's academic, developmental, and functional characteristics simply makes the evaluation [of referred children] more specific" (Turnbull, 2005, p. 322). These structures require that the evaluation team must consider the whole child when making a determination for special education placement. The goal for education is to provide a free and appropriate public education (FAPE).

The IDEA and NCLB both are concerned with the children as products of the school setting and their ability to function as adults in society. Section 601 (c)(5)(A)(i) states that children need to be prepared to lead productive lives as self-sufficient, productive citizens. Congress claims that this mandate can be met by educators' having high expectations for all children (Turnbull, 2005). The goal then for schools is to provide meaningful educational experiences to children resulting in their successful completion of school.[22]

An issue that continues to appear in the research deals with the skill level of the teacher. There seems to be a correlation with a teachers lack self-efficacy. This perception of their own abilities as a teacher oftentimes results in ineffective skills for meeting the needs of children in the classroom (Egyed and[23] Short, 2006). This lack of self-efficacy often leads to a referral for special education; which may not be an appropriate placement for this child. Clearly, the critical points are for teachers to be supported and well-educated in working with the diverse populations in today's classrooms.

This support is made possible through professional development opportunities designed to address skill areas in behavior management and intervention strategies. Building a teacher's skills can lead to greater self-efficacy, which hopefully will meet the needs of more children in the classroom.

[24]Fiscal Impact

---

[22] **LR: Is this paragraph properly cited and referenced according to the sixth edition of the APA manual?**

[23] **Use an ampersand (&), not *and*, in a citation within parentheses.**

[24] **LR: Where is the Literature Review section that was indicated in the table of contents? If there is a Literature Review section, it needs to be identified with a separate heading.**

To best meet the needs of children and reduce referrals to special education, both NCLB and IDEA included language recommending the use of a Response to Intervention model in schools (Wright & Wright, 2009). Response to Intervention is both a general education and special education service. The model combines many programs and reduces the need for a special education referral in order for students to gain access to interventions (Mastropieri & Scruggs, 2005). The goal of this model is provide quality targeted instruction designed to fill in the gaps in the child's instruction.

Response to Intervention is a framework for applying research based interventions to students that struggling to make progress in regular core subjects. "The advantages of an RTI approach are clear. RTI provides a direct focus on student learning and outcomes and increases accountability for all students regardless if they are eventually referred" (Mather and Kaufman, 2006, p. 748) for further assessment for special education.

Response to Intervention can be considered a pre-referral process for special education evaluations. This then brings forth the question of where the funding should come from. RTI allows for up to 15% of special education funds to be spent on Early Intervention Services for children in the preschool and primary grades (Mastropieri and Scruggs, 2005); (Dunst, Trivette, Appl, & Bagnato, 2004). RTI in theory will also reduce the number of evaluations conducted by special education staff, as the number of children referred for learning disabilities is reduced (Mastropieri and Scruggs, 2005). Thus, less funding will be spent on evaluations, and more can be funneled into programming. The evaluation process is funded through several sources: Part B, special education, ARRA, Title[25] and general education funding. Determining the best sources

[25] **Use commas after each item in a series.**

for funding various parts of the process, according to Mastropieri and Scruggs (2005) is still up for debate. The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, 2009,[26] contain several principles for schools when allocating resources. One principle in improving student achievement is toward the purchase and implementation of high quality assessments. A second principle is to make improvements in teacher effectiveness. Both of these principles are indirectly related to the referral processes for special education in that, through high quality teaching and effective assessment and intervention processes, fewer children will need special education services. The catch with ARRA funds is that they are only available for two years. After the fiscal 2011 school year, these funds will no longer be available.

In Montana, schools receive about 14% of their funding from federal sources, 41% from the state, 26% from property tax, and the remaining 19% from local sources (Understanding, 2008). At the Federal level, both Title funding and Part B funding are federal grants that are dispersed through a state grant application process. These two funds are based upon student enrollment and special education identified student enrollment (ESEA, 2009).

Training Stakeholders

Professional development is one of most cited resources in the research for improving services to all children, especially those with learning or behavior issues (Soodak and Podell, 1993). To improve teacher efficacy and thereby reduce unwarranted referrals to special education, Egyed and Short (2006) discuss three areas in need of support and training. First, teachers need training in instructional strategies and behavior management. This training is essential to developing teachers who exhibit greater tolerance of and skill for managing

[26] **LR: When referencing large government documents, it is best practice to provide page numbers.**

behaviors which will result in less burnout and special education referrals. The second part of the training is to develop a framework for pre-referral process employed consistently by all teachers. Third, teachers need support in order to persist in their efforts to help students who are at-risk. This provision of professional development can take place in the form of workshops, book studies, mentoring programs, professional learning teams, and inspirational reading material. All of these programs require some form of funding, and depending on the focus, these monies can come from ARRA, Part B, and Title funding (ESEA, 2009). Each of these sources has provisions for professional development built into the funding and reporting structures.

In Montana, Title II, Part A in the ESEA can be used for teacher and principal training and recruiting (Complete Handbook, 2007). Another part of this is the provision that all trainings should be made available to nonpublic school staff. Through coordinated efforts to effectively train staff in best practices, uninformed referrals to special education will be minimized.

Plan

To meet the needs of the various components within this policy the following are recommendations:

1. Utilize Title II funds for professional development of teachers in behavior management and interventions.
2. Utilize Part B and Medicaid funds for special education personnel to provide services.
3. No cost: Special Education Director conducts staff meeting at each building, sharing information and offering direction for completing an implications for educational planning statement.

Conclusion[27]

There is a need for educators to enlist unbiased data driven decisions for determining the best placement for children is essential for academic achievement for all children. The original purpose of this paper is to clarify that through the use of Response to Intervention strategies and effective teacher training, children can receive the needed interventions to be successful in school. When districts can ensure that all staff are participating in the referral and evaluation process in an unbiased manner, then special education will no longer be the dumping ground for disruptive children, but an organized intense intervention on a continuum of services.

During the evaluation report the evaluator should construct statements written in terms understandable to all team members. These statements should explain in detail how the student's response to interventions affects the child's overall educational performance. When staff engages in meaningful diagnostic assessments, the child will receive the appropriate placement related to their specific educational needs.

[27] **LR: The conclusion should restate the problem, provide a summary of the key points identified in the paper, and offer areas for improvement or further inquiry.**

IMPLICATIONS FOR EDUCATIONAL PLANNING page#

References

[28]Abidin, R.R, & Robinson, L.L. (2002). Stress, biases, or professionalism: What drives teachers' referral judgments of students with challenging behaviors? *Journal of Emotional and Behavioral Disorders,10*(4), 204-212. Retrieved June 10, 2009, from ProQuest Psychology Journals database. (Document ID: 251656181).[29]

American Recovery and Reinvestment Act Fact sheet. (2009). Retrieved June 10, 2009 from, http://www.ed.gov/policy/gen/leg/recovery/factsheet/title-i.html

Complete Montana OPI State and Federal Grants Handbook. (2007). Retrieved June 10, 2009 from, http://www.opi.mt.gov/FederalPrograms/handbook.html

Dunst, C.J., & Trivette, C.M. (2004). Toward a categorization scheme of child find, referral, early identification and eligibility determination practices. *Tracelines, 1*(2). Available from http://www.tracecenter.info/products.php.

Dunst, C.J., Trivette, C.M., Appl, D.J., & Bagnato, S.J. (2004). Framework for investigating child find, referral, early identification, and eligibility determination practices. *Tracelines, 1*(1). Available from http://www.tracecenter.info/products.php.

Egyed, C.J., & Short, R.J. (2006). Teacher self-efficacy, burnout, experience and decision to refer a disruptive student. [30]*School Psychology International, 27*(4) 462-474. DOI: 10.1177/014303430670432. [Electronic version] Retrieved June 3, 2009 from, http://spi.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/27/4/462

---

[28] The first line of each reference entry should be flush left and subsequent lines should be indented five spaces. Double-space the entire reference list.

[29] Use digital object identifiers (DOIs) instead of document IDs (see APA, 6th ed., pp. 187–192.)

[30] Italicize the titles of journals and books.

[31]Elementary & Secondary Education. Retrieved June 10, 2009 from, http://www.ed.gov/policy/elsec/reg/edpicks.jhtml?src=ln

Evaluation Guide. (2008). Retrieved June 3, 2009 from, www.opi.mt.gov/PDF/SpecED/guides/EvalRptGuideAug08.pdf

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 2004, P.L. 108-446.

Mastropieri, M., & Scruggs, T. (2005, November). Feasibility and consequences of response to intervention: examination of the issues and scientific evidence as a model for the identification of individuals with learning disabilities. *Journal of Learning Disabilities, 38*(6), 525-531. Retrieved June 11, 2009, from CINAHL with Full Text database.

Mather, N., & Kaufman, N. (2006, September). Introduction to the Special Issue, Part One: It's about the what, the how well, and the why. *Psychology in the Schools, 43*(7), 747-752. Retrieved June 12, 2009, doi:10.1002/pits.20185

Montana Special Education Compliance Monitoring Process. (2007). Retrieved May 16, 2009 from, opi.mt.gov/PDF/SpecEd/guides/CompliMontrgPrcs.pdf

Soodak, L., & Podell, D. (1993, Spring93). Teacher efficacy and student problem as factors in special education referral. *Journal of Special Education, 27*(1), 66. Retrieved June 11, 2009, from Academic Search Alumni Edition database.

Special Education Basics. (2006). Retrieved June 3, 2009 from, www.pluk.org/Pubs/training/SPED_Basics.pdf

[31] **LR: Can you identify other APA sixth edition referencing errors in this reference list?**

Turnbull, I. (2005, November). Individuals with disabilities education act reauthorization: Accountability and personal responsibility. *Remedial & Special Education, 26*(6), 320-326. Retrieved June 11, 2009, from Academic Search Alumni Edition database.

Understanding Montana School Finance and School District Budgets. (2008). Retrieved June 10, 2009 from, www.parkcounty.org/UnderstSchlFin.pdf

Wright, P.W.D., & Wright, P.D. (2009). *Wrightslaw: Special education law* (2nd ed.). Hartfield, VA: Harbor House Law Press.

Ysseldyke, J. (2005, Spring2005). Assessment and decision making for students with learning disabilities: What if this is as good as it gets? *Learning Disability Quarterly*, *28*(2), 125-128. Retrieved June 11, 2009, from Academic Search Premier database.